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Post-Tribune

Longing for 'return to normalcy'

September 29, 2008

By Mark Taylor Post-Tribune correspondent

It finally became official: we're a disaster area. I could have told President Bush that a week ago.

Not that I'm ungrateful. I've been called an unofficial disaster for years. Now it's on the record. And it means that the thousands of Northwest Indiana residents who suffered severe damage during the recent flooding will receive much needed federal aid. Millionaire investment bankers shouldn't be the only ones bailed out. A lot of us need the help.

Pride is the first casualty of an evacuee.

It's tough to admit you need help and even harder to accept it.

But I did. I took the free bleach, rubber gloves and Pine-Sol, gratefully scarfed down the donated fried chicken and bottled water. And I'm not even a little ashamed.

I'm not impoverished. I'm not sick, injured or disabled in any way. I give to people in need, but I've never been on the receiving end. Until now.

Now I'm not too proud to beg.

Like many of my neighbors in Munster and elsewhere in Lake and Porter counties, I've been sucker-punched by Mother Nature twice in six weeks and my sincerest wish is merely to return to normalcy. My family and I have lived out of a suitcase for 10 days now as the putrid waters of the inappropriately named Little Calumet River have receded and we have been able to return to drain our homes, discard our belongings and repair our homes and hearts.

My family and I are fortunate. We're not starving. We're not destitute. Like many of the flood victims -- did I just call myself a victim? -- we're just angry, frustrated, discombobulated, sad, disconsolate, giddy and tired, tired and dirty. Being homeless, even if you have a nice place to stay, is very unsettling.

Your daily routines change. You and your spouse assign each other daily tasks. Hose down tents mud-caked by flood waters, check. Call FEMA, check. Spray disinfectant on basement rafters and walls. Check. Call NIPSCO to find out when they'll come to install a new gas meter, check. Find time to laugh, relax and wonder why you're still wearing the same pair of cutoff jeans for the last week? Unchecked.

You look for things in the place you're staying that might be in your uninhabitable home, or might be a Dumpster.

But you learn to cope, to feed off of the many little kindnesses and numerous acts of grace bestowed upon you, such as the enormous help and comfort those friends and relatives offer.

More than 30 volunteered to help us haul away our water-logged belongings to a growing trash heap on our curb, a scene replicated hundreds of times in blocks throughout Munster. They braved the dank odors --cleaning out a refrigerator that's been submerged four five days can humble a Rockefeller -- heavy loads and aching bones that we all suffered carrying tons of useless appliances, furniture and boxes of soaked books up a steep staircase and out to the street. That kind of generosity and selflessness inspires and awes you. Humans can be a pretty amazing species in these times.

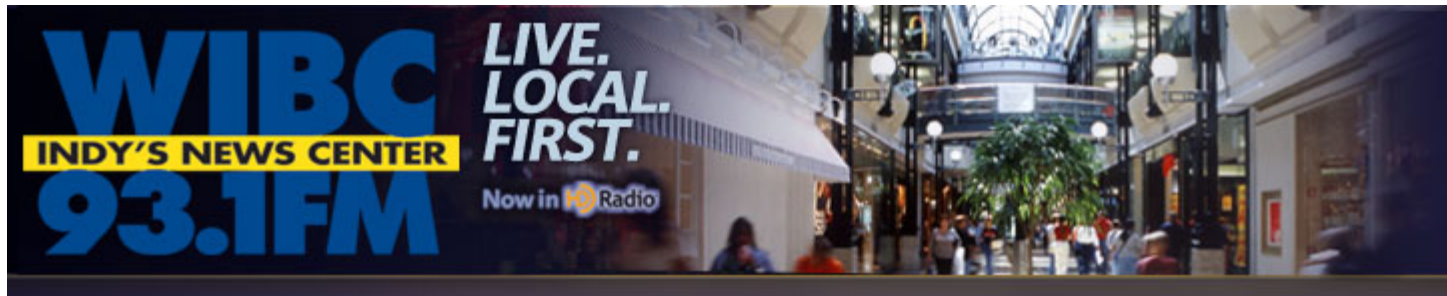
Power returned to our house Sept. 22, one week and one day after the storm forced us from our homes. Earlier our friend Bill and his pal Arnie installed a circuit breaker -- our previous one never learned how to swim -- and another friend named Bill reinstalled our computer, a necessity for a 21st century journalist. My buddy Eugene rode his bike out daily from Hammond and worked like a coolie without a break. Parents of my children's friends, cousins and in-

laws, former co-workers and my wife's students and colleagues pitched in applying their many and various skills. My brothers and cousins cleaned and cooked and labored as if I were paying them in gold.

It's enough to make a grown man cry.

Soon we'll have gas and hot water and hopefully a furnace to stave off those frigid Region winters just around the corner. Our basement is empty, an echo chamber unadorned with the accoutrements with which we humans like to surround ourselves. No art. No books. No furniture. No appliances. Just a hole in the ground that is dark and moist and would make a good set for a horror film.

You don't really want to go down there. It's like being in a troubled marriage in which one spouse was unfaithful and both know it will never be the same again. You want to be optimistic. It's your nature. But you learn that, just like Mother Nature, some things are out of your control.



Officials: Flood Victims May Be Forgoing FEMA Aid

By the Associated Press
9/29/2008

Applications for emergency food stamps are outpacing those for federal disaster assistance more than 2-to-1 at recovery centers in flood-stricken northwest Indiana, officials say.

Disaster recovery centers in Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties processed 5,000 food stamp applications in the first two days of operation and were on track to process that many again on Saturday, said Andy Miller, director of the Indiana Office of Disaster Recovery.

But he said less than half that number had requested aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Homeowners, renters and businesses in the three counties can apply for federal disaster aid for housing, home repairs, low-cost loans to cover uninsured property losses and other aid. Harrison, Jefferson and Jennings counties in southern Indiana also were approved for aid Friday.

"The one thing we want to do is encourage folks to make sure if they had damage to their home, they should apply with FEMA," Miller said.

Much of the state suffered damage starting Sept. 12 from torrential rains that caused flooding and high winds that knocked out power and damaged homes and businesses.

About 500 people lined up at the Munster disaster recovery center by its 8 a.m. opening Saturday. About 1,000 lined up at a similar site in Gary and another 1,000 in Lake Station, Miller said. About 300 lined up at a center in Valparaiso, he said.

Officials said separate lines are established for food stamps and FEMA aid, and some people go home after receiving food stamps rather than wait through another long line.

At the center in Munster on Saturday, Kimberly Wujak of Merrillville waited in the food stamp line while her husband waited in the other line to apply for FEMA assistance.

"Thirteen months ago, we were flooded and no one helped us," she said. "Maybe we'll get lucky this time and get some help."

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